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SUBJECT: NEPAL: BHUTANESE REFUGEES ANGERED OVER  
REPATRIATION CONDITIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Michael E. Malinowski for reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (SBU) Summary. On December 22, the Nepal - Bhutan Joint Verification Team (JVT) visited Khudunabari Camp to brief refugees on conditions for repatriation to Bhutan. According to the Bhutanese JVT members, Category I refugees will be returned with full citizenship rights; Category II refugees will be issued temporary identity cards, settled in camps with one member of each family entitled to work as laborers, health and education facilities will be provided, but freedom of movement will not be allowed; and Category IV refugees will be handed-over in police custody while their family members will be kept in a separate camp. The refugees responded angrily, surrounded the JVT members and verbally attacked them. As the JVT members attempted to leave the camp, refugees pelted them with stones, injuring one and damaging their vehicles. The Bhutanese JVT members cut short their visit to Nepal, departing early on December 23 for Bhutan. The refugees' angry reaction does not bode well for the future of the repatriation process. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On December 22, the Bhutanese and Nepal members of the Joint Verification Team (JVT) visited Khudunabari Camp in eastern Nepal for the first of a series of briefings to the refugees explaining conditions for repatriation to Bhutan. The Bhutan team was led by Dr. Sonam Tenzin while the Nepal team was led by Sushil Jung Rana, Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Home Affairs. According to refugee leaders in Khudunabari Camp, the JVT's plan was to brief the heads of households of each of the 7 sectors over 7 days. Khudunabari Camp's Sector A residents were, therefore, invited to participate in the briefing, which was held inside the community hall inside the camp. Because the community hall can accommodate only roughly 100 people, the remaining Sector A residents stayed outside the hall listening to the briefing via microphone. A UNHCR Security Officer was also present outside the hall. The account described below was provided by refugee leaders present at the briefing. Some of the statements have been confirmed by UNHCR, while others are awaiting confirmation.

3. (SBU) Category I refugees, or those who were forcefully evicted from Bhutan, Tenzin reportedly indicated, would be repatriated in the first phase and would be issued citizenship cards upon arrival. The 274 individuals in this category will enjoy the full rights of any Bhutanese living in Bhutan, he said. Tenzin remarked, however, that any Category I refugee who sold his land either to the government or to a private buyer would not receive a land allocation. Those who had not sold their land would be granted substitute land in equal measure to the land registration document. According to refugee leaders, Tenzin opened the floor for questions regarding Category I refugees, but cut off the questioning before answering even the first question.

4. (SBU) Category II refugees, or those who allegedly left Bhutan voluntarily, will be issued a temporary ID card upon arrival in Bhutan. During the 2-year probation period, all family members must be physically present in Bhutan and cannot leave the country. To qualify for citizenship, Category II refugees will not be required to read and write Dzongkha, but must speak Dzongkha and be familiar with Bhutan's history, culture and traditions. Citizenship will not be granted if any re-applicant is found to have spoken against the King, the country or the people of Bhutan. According to the refugees and confirmed by UNHCR, Tenzin said that, after arrival in Bhutan, Category II returnees will be settled in camps, and one member from each family will be employed as laborers at road construction sites. The returnees will be provided with health and education facilities, but will not have freedom of movement, he added. (Note. The refugees have inferred from this that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) intends to allow only one member from each family to work, which they claim will not provide sufficient income for the entire family. End Note.) Tenzin also reportedly suggested that the RGOB will form a committee to interview the re-applicants for citizenship. The refugees, as well as the Chief District Officer of Jhapa District who was present at the scene, characterized the attitude of the Bhutanese JVT members as being "very harsh" and "intentionally provocative." Some refugees believe that the RGOB is trying to discourage Category II refugees from

returning to Bhutan.

15. (SBU) Tenzin reportedly remarked that the JVT had completed its review of appeals submitted by Category III refugees (non-Bhutanese) and will recommend to the RGOB that no changes of status be made. He would say nothing more than that the decision on the results of Category III appeals would be made by the government.

16. (SBU) Category IV refugees who decide to return to Bhutan, Tenzin said, would be delivered to Bhutan by the Nepal Police and processed according to Bhutanese law. The refugee leaders indicated, and UNHCR confirmed, that the families of those categorized as criminals would be kept in separate camps. The refugee leaders fear this would stigmatize the families as "anti-nationals."

17. (SBU) Following the Bhutanese JVT leader's briefing, the Government of Nepal (GON) representative, Sushil Jung Rana, claimed that the GON would treat all Bhutanese like any other foreigner applying for citizenship. Free transportation for returnees and their household effects would be provided, he said. According to the refugee leaders, Rana cautioned that action would be taken against refugees who attempt to leave the camps and integrate themselves in Nepal. Rana also indicated that the GON is not responsible for any statement made by the Bhutanese JVT members.

18. (SBU) Following the conclusion of the briefing, the refugees became aggressive, surrounded the JVT members and verbally harangued them. The Chief District Officer of Jhapa reported that the refugees prevented the JVT members from departing the community hall. Nepal police officers were stationed in the camps to provide security to the JVT, but were prevented from entering the hall by the refugees. After an undetermined amount of time, the police officer in charge was able to enter the building and bring out the JVT members unharmed. However, outside the hall, some refugees pelted stones at the JVT team, damaging the vehicles while they drove away. One JVT member reportedly was hit on the head with a stone, later requiring stitches. No other injuries were reported. According to press reports, the Bhutanese members of the JVT departed Nepal for Bhutan the morning of December 23.

19. (C) Comment. The negative reaction on the part of the refugees is unsurprising, given the information provided by the JVT members. If, as the refugees claim, the RGOB plans to settle Category II returnees in camps, restrict freedom of movement, and allow only one family member to work, the refugees have a right to question the sincerity of the RGOB in fulfilling the spirit of the bilateral agreement. Impressions given by the Chief District Officer in Jhapa that the Bhutanese JVT leader used "very harsh words" while explaining conditions for return seems to verify the refugees' opinion that the Bhutanese JVT appeared to be actively discouraging repatriation. We had hoped that the JVT's visit to Khudunabari Camp would clarify conditions of return for the refugees. Unfortunately, clarification has been achieved, but at a very steep price that could serve to lower the numbers of refugees who decide to voluntarily return to Bhutan. End Comment.  
MALINOWSKI